

FIELD GUIDE

THE CYPRESS DOME HABITAT

OVERVIEW

From a distance the **cypress dome** looks like an island: a dry forest towering over the surrounding marsh. In reality, cypress domes form around depressions, or areas of slightly deeper water. This is a fascinating habitat to explore and is home to some of the Everglade's most interesting and rare plants and animals. You'll often find that it's a few degrees cooler and more humid in the middle of a cypress dome...but bring your bug spray. The many bromeliads you might find are perfect micro-habitats for mosquitoes to breed!

Bromeliad species you will find in a cypress dome are **epiphytes**. An epiphyte is basically a plant that grows atop another plant or tree. For small plants like bromeliads, orchids and ferns, this is a handy adaptation to have in a habitat where the water can be 4 feet deep or more. Larger trees like the bald cypress or the pond apple become handy host trees for these epiphytes to grow upon.

PLANTS

BALD CYPRESS- this tree is a deciduous conifer which grows in temperate climates in the southeastern United States. It loses its needles in the winter (or dry season).

Where the soil is rich and deep, a bald cypress tree can grow as tall as 120 feet. In areas of the Everglades where the soil is thin and the ground is rocky, they grow much slower and even a small tree can be over 100 years old. We call those **dwarf cypress** trees.



POND APPLE- this water-loving tree grows in swampy areas in subtropical and tropical climates. The fruit, which resembles an apple, is sometimes eaten by alligators.

Pond apples are great host trees for epiphytes like resurrection fern and ghost orchids.



GHOST ORCHID- this very rare epiphytic orchid is also unusual in that it is a leafless orchid.

The ghost orchid flower has a very long nectar spur. Only one insect in Florida has a proboscis long enough to reach down the nectar spur to sip. Because of its exceptionally long nose, the **giant sphynx moth** is the only known pollinator of the ghost orchid.



CARDINAL AIR PLANT- the cardinal air plant is one of the most common bromeliads in the Everglades. "Air plant" is simply another name for an epiphyte.

Rainwater, along with cypress needles, tree bark and other organic material are caught and held by the spreading leaves of the air plant. The plant uses these nutrients, and also creates a nice little "micro-habitat" for small critters like tree frogs and mosquito larvae.



RESURRECTION FERN- the resurrection fern is a common epiphytic fern found throughout the southeastern US.

This plant has the ability to survive after losing over 75% of its water. Most plants would die after losing 12%. Once the rains come, the resurrection fern "resurrects" over the next 24 hours.



ANIMALS

FLORIDA GAR- the Florida Gar is very common in fresh water bodies throughout Florida. It can grow up to 3 feet long, and is easily identified by its long, toothy snout.

The Florida gar is a prehistoric species. This survivor uses an air bladder to breathe in swampy, low oxygen water.



AMERICAN ALLIGATOR- the American Alligator is like the bull-dozer of the Everglades. During the dry season, gators will often find remaining depressions filled with water, and enlarge those solution holes by digging and pushing the muck about.

Often times, it's these gator holes are where you'll find a cypress dome growing.



FISHING SPIDER- there are several species of fishing spiders in the Everglades (pictured: Dolomedes tenebrosus).

This large spider often hangs out on the trunk of a cypress tree, waiting to ambush small fish or crayfish in the water below.



BARRED OWL- Barred owls live in large, mature forests, including cypress forests, where they nest in tree cavities. They often use abandoned pileated woodpecker holes to nest in.

Barred owls mostly hunt at night and will eat a variety of small animals such as rodents, snakes and frogs.



COOL FEATURES

CYPRESS KNEES- Cypress knees are a part of the tree's root structure but their function is a bit of a mystery. Some scientists have speculated that they provide structural support for the tree. Others have theorized that they perform the function of oxygen exchange.

